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Reflections on widening participation policy: macro influences and micro implications

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ABSTRACT *The central contention of the article is that access to higher education (HE) may be increasingly becoming a positional good premised on individualism and economic and cultural capitalism rather than a democratic good predicated on a political commitment to equality and social justice. The article explores the macro influences on widening participation policy and further considers the contexts, implications and outcomes of widening participation policy at meso and micro levels both generally and in the professional context of the author's work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at an outer London post-1992 university.*

Introduction

Drawing upon the analytical tools developed by Ball (1994, 2005) and others, this article explores the macro influences on widening participation policy and goes on to consider the implications and outcomes of widening participation policy at meso and micro levels both generally and in the professional context of my work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at an outer London post-1992 university. Firstly, I expand upon policy analysis approaches. Secondly, I identify pertinent theoretical concepts. Thirdly, I utilise relevant literature and draw upon examples from practice to evaluate widening participation policy. The article concludes with a critical appraisal of widening participation policy, arguing that it involves central dilemmas and its objectives are contestable because of competing social and economic objectives (e.g. market principles versus social justice) and inherent contradictions in higher education (HE) policy. I argue that access to HE is increasingly a positional good premised on individualism and economic and cultural capitalism rather than a democratic good predicated on a wider political commitment to equality and social justice. 'Positional goods' accord 'zero-sum' benefits and are enjoyed by some to the exclusion and cost of others, whilst 'democratic goods' are goods from which all can potentially benefit (Jary and Thomas, 1999: 3).

Widening participation became a key governmental policy objective following the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997) - the Dearing Report. A key concern noted by Dearing, of course, was the continual under-representation of non-traditional students in HE, for example, women, ethnic minorities and students from particular social classes, i.e. with parents in non-professional or unskilled work (Dearing, 1997). The subsequent government widening participation strategy set a target to increase the HE participation rate to 50 per cent for students between the ages of 18-30 by 2010 (DfES, 2003a).

Widening participation policy has led to significant changes and is presenting British higher education institutions (HEIs) with challenges as they endeavour to respond to an increased number of students from more diverse social backgrounds in a context of chronic under funding (McClaran, 2003; Trow, 2005). A growing body of literature evaluating widening participation policy has explored its broader influences, for example, political ideology, economic factors and globalisation (Gibbs, 2001; Thomas, 2001; Levidow, 2002; Elliott, 2003). These macro analyses are somewhat critical, arguing that the widening participation policy agenda is driven by economic rationalism and signifies the marketisation of HE. Other studies have undertaken meso analysis and explored the organisational context and implications

of widening participation policy. Key issues emerging from these studies include deficits in HEIs' infrastructures to support widening participation and problems with retention and progression amongst non-traditional students (Watt and Paterson, 2000; HEFCE, 2002; Johnson and Deem, 2003; Lall et al., 2003; O'Hara and Bingham, 2004). Yet another body of research focuses on the perceptions and experiences of prospective or actual non-traditional students (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Christie et al., 2001; Connor, 2001; Marks et al., 2003; Read and Leathwood, 2003; Universities UK, 2003; Callender and Jackson, 2005). These micro studies have illuminated key factors inhibiting non-traditional students from entering or remaining in HE, for example, social class, financial concerns and transitional difficulties post-enrollment.

Whilst the above literature provides key insights, relatively few commentators have systematically tracked and analysed developments in widening participation policy. Studies evaluating education policy in this way, mainly within schools, include the work of Ball (1994) who applied a policy trajectory analytical framework to explore the implementation of the national curriculum. This type of approach, unlike previous approaches, involves 'cross-sectional rather than single level analysis by tracing policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state itself through to the various recipients of policy' (Ball, 1994: 26). It also provides a useful mechanism for 'linking and tracing the discursive origins and possibilities of policy, as well as the intentions embedded in responses to and [the] effects of policy' (Ball, 1994: 26). The key benefits of analysing education policy in this way are encapsulated by Ozga (1990: 359) who states that such approaches 'bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro level investigation, especially which takes account of people's perceptions and experiences'.

Policy and policy analysis tools

Ball (2005) refers to policy as both text and discourse. Whilst policy text can, for example, take the form of official policy documents, Ozga (2000: 2) suggests that 'policy is also a process rather than a product, involving negotiation, contestation or struggle between different groups who may lie outside the formal

machinery of official policymaking'. Thus, policies are dynamic entities which are constantly evolving and being transmuted through discourse both during and after the policymaking process on the basis of, for example, different educational values espoused by key social actors such as politicians and activists. Juma and Clarke (1995: 124) expound upon the role different social actors can play in policy processes: 'there are complex relationships existing between the different actors who operate in the (three) policy environments of formulation, implementation and evaluation, and....such environments are always in flux'.

Hence, policies may take different forms in different terrains according to the involvement of key social actors, and how policies are received and interpreted on the ground, i.e. whether they are supported or contested. Therefore, policy processes are not linear and a key benefit of a policy trajectory approach is that it enables an analysis of what Ozga (1990: 360) refers to as 'ad hocery', 'serendipity', 'muddle' and negotiation in policymaking and implementation at macro, meso and micro levels.

Bowe (1992: 20) and Ball (2005: 51) outline five contexts of education policy investigation underpinning the policy trajectory approach. Firstly, the context of influence; secondly, the context of text production; thirdly, the context(s) of practice; fourthly, the contexts of outcome; and lastly, the context of political struggle. The latter relates to political and social activities with the potential to address inequalities. All five contexts permit an unveiling of dominant discourses influencing policy processes by revealing what Foucault (1979) refers to as reproductive relations of power that exist not merely at super structural levels but wherever they come into play, for example, hierarchical structures within university departments. A policy trajectory approach permits the exposure of dominant interests being served by educational policies, and may reveal which social groups are included in and excluded from the process and some of the unintended consequences of policy, for example, persistent or growing social inequalities. It is therefore particularly pertinent to widening participation.

Professional context and concerns

My interest in widening participation stems from experiences as a Social Work Admissions Tutor. A

key professional concern is that HE policies, including widening participation policy, have significantly increased demand for social work places. There has been an unprecedented rise in undergraduate applications within my own department over the past four years which has led to increased competition for places. The number of undergraduate applications has more than trebled since 2002 (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005a). Manifestly, increased competition for places and the introduction of more stringent professional entry requirements in 2003 (i.e. written tests in mathematics and English) may potentially reinforce inequalities of access amongst non-traditional students. In this article I reflect upon some of the professional and ethical dilemmas associated with the unintended consequences of both increasing and at the same time seeking to widen HE participation. I also illustrate how I seek to mitigate some of these potential issues through actions that empower non-traditional students, and which essentially endorse my own value stance, which is that HE participation is a democratic good that should be premised on equality of access and a commitment to social justice.

Relevant theoretical perspectives

Theories developed by Giddens and Bourdieu vis-a-vis 'structure', 'agency' and 'habitus' are pertinent to an analysis of widening participation policy. The concepts of structure and agency relate to the relationship of the individual to society and the extent to which individuals determine their own lives and create their own life chances through individual agency (e.g. personal actions) or collective agency (e.g. social movements), or whether they are shaped by powerful social structures such as economic relations, political institutions, bureaucratic rules and regulations or, indeed, the education system (Giddens, 1997). For example, structural issues linked to the casualisation of the labour market may create economic and social inequalities and may provide explanations for why some socio-economic groups continue to be under-represented within HE (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). Structural theses do not, however, explain why some people from socially disadvantaged groups do access HE and do prosper economically and socially, a factor which may be better explained by agency and where individuals position themselves.

Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) builds upon structure/agency debates by arguing that culture is differentially distributed in society and that powerful groups reproduce forms of contemporary culture which both support and favour their own interests (cultural capitalism). Bourdieu saw the education system as a hidden structure manipulated by the powerful to reproduce the overall society (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). He described the processes by which minority elites shape society and perpetuate their own interests by referring to the term 'habitus', which I will refer to as 'elite habitus', and which can take different forms, including individual, familial and institutional. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977: 83; Bourdieu, 1993: 78) described habitus as 'a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations' and 'as a power of adaptation which produces actions'. For example, elite schooling in Britain can be considered to privilege and elevate the social status and life chances of white, upper middle class men. Bourdieu (1990) argued that, whilst adaptation can occasionally take the form of radical conversion, it generally tends to be reproductive rather than transformative. McDonald (1996), cited by Reay et al., (2001: 2), aptly summarises the parameters of institutional habitus:

Any conception of institutional habitus would similarly, constitute a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation.

In summary, Giddens and Bourdieu illustrate how individuals' and social groups' positioning can be influenced by social structures such as education systems which reproduce and transmit predominant cultural norms, and which are further reproduced or changed through agency or habitus. These ideas are particularly pertinent to an analysis of widening participation and may explain why particular social classes and social groups have historically been excluded, continue to be excluded, or are less favorably positioned within HEIs (Archer et al., 2003). They also provide a reflective tool for HE professionals like myself to consider whether we are unwittingly perpetuating educational inequalities

through our professional practices, or whether we are taking an active stance to promote social justice by empowering non-traditional students and supporting their access and progression through HE.

The context of text production

Widening participation is not a new policy concern; it has been a recurrent theme of several key policy texts, including the Robbins Report (1963) as well as the Dearing Report (1997). A key concern noted by Dearing and a perceived failure of the implementation of the Robbins Report, was the continual underrepresentation of students from non-traditional backgrounds in HE. Dearing recommended the extension of lifelong learning through increased participation in HE: 'There should be maximum participation in initial higher education by young and mature students and in lifetime learning by adults, having regards to the needs of individuals, the nation and the future labour market' (Dearing, 1997: 3).

This excerpt's emphasis on both the 'needs of individuals' and the 'future labour market' suggests that widening participation policy is underpinned by both social and economic objectives. These considerations are a central political concern of government, as the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, illustrates:

...expansion has not yet extended to the talented and best from all backgrounds. In Britain today too many of those born into less advantaged families still see a university place as being beyond their reach, whatever their ability.

Society is changing. Our economy is becoming ever more knowledge-based - we are increasingly making our living through selling high-value services, rather than physical goods. These trends demand a more highly-skilled workforce.

...there is compelling evidence that education increases productivity, and moreover that higher education is the most important phase of education for economic growth in developed countries, with increases in HE found to be positively and significantly related to per capita growth. (DfES, 2003a: 2, 58)

However, as these excerpts suggest - and as Chapter Five of the White Paper (which specifically relates to widening participation) demonstrates - there is relatively limited reference to social objectives espousing the humanist or liberal values of widening participation. Instead, social objectives are inextricably linked with economic objectives, which have particular connotations for HEIs and professional practice, as will be demonstrated in the following sections of the article.

The context of influence

In considering the context of influence(s) - in addition to predominant economic imperatives - widening participation policy also appears to be influenced by political ideology, as the Labour Party's 2005 pre-election manifesto indicates:

The economy of the future will be based on knowledge, innovation and creativity. That applies to both manufacturing and services. The modern role for government - the case for a modern employment and skills policy - is to equip people to succeed, to be on their side, helping them become more skilled, adaptable and flexible for the job ahead rather than the old Tory way of walking away leaving people unaided to face change. (Labour Party, 2005: 16)

This excerpt places particular emphasis on economic growth and increasing Britain's economic competitiveness in the global market through skills development. Indeed, Scott (2005: 8) argues that current widening participation policy 'is much less about social justice than about enabling people to participate effectively in the labour market'. He supports this contention by pointing out that the 50 per cent participation target 'was devised not as a social ideal, another extension of democratic opportunities, but as a workforce target based on the projected demand for graduates by 2010' (Scott, 2005: 8). This suggests a HE experience is perceived in political terms primarily as a positional good based on labour market imperatives and individualistic outcomes rather than a democratic or social good. This claim is substantiated by Fairclough's (2000) scrutiny of New Labour's 'third-way' political discourse; recurring themes are the emphasis on Britain's competitive

position in the international global market and the uncritical acceptance of the current economic order and globalisation per se. Indeed, Olssen et al. (2004: 5) argue that 'political parties championing the so-called 'third-way'...consider economic globalisation to be a reality to be accommodated with a mixture of enthusiasm and pragmatism'. This uncritical acceptance is of concern because it suggests, as was also the case with the preceding Conservative administration, that New Labour's third-way policies espouse the merits of globalisation whilst simultaneously denying the unwanted associated consequences of globalisation, for example, the growth of absolute poverty and widening social inequalities across nation states (Wiwa, 2001).

A model demonstrating increasing HE participation developed by Trow (2005) indicates that cross-nationally HE systems have historically tended to go through three stages of development and transformation, albeit at different rates and in different forms: (1) elite - shaping the mind and character of a ruling class (which fits with Bourdieu's notion of education systems playing a cultural transformative role for an elite minority and the notion of elite habitus); (2) mass - transition of skills and preparation for a broader range of technical and economic elite roles (which partially fits with the current British model of HE and the widening participation policy agenda to maximise economic and human capital); and (3) universal - adaptation of the 'whole population' to rapid social and technological change (which fits with Labour's third-way discourse). Trow (2005) dates the expansion of European and American universities back to the early 1960s, with much more rapid expansion, albeit unevenly, during the 1970s and 1980s.

There may, however, be unintended consequences associated with the shift towards mass HE now apparent in the UK. As a result of globalisation and massification, HEIs are arguably in a constant state of flux as they strive to respond to competing agendas. HEIs increasingly form a conduit for economic capital, i.e. an 'education for the market' or as a 'learning factory' for new skills (Aronowitz, 2000; Tooley, (2000) whilst simultaneously being seen as a means of promoting social justice for those previously excluded. Gibbs (2001) warns of the dangers of the

former by arguing it can 'lead to the commodification of education into skills packages to be managed through market principles rather than under the morality of fairness'. Manifestly, such developments are potentially at odds with the humanist virtue of a university education which has traditionally been seen as an important means of developing the individual as a whole (Fanghanel, 2004). In political and policy terms HE is increasingly perceived as a positional good rather than a democratic good, with widening participation being seen predominantly as a source of economic and human capital, and to some extent cultural capital as Bourdieu argued. Whilst globalisation is a contested concept with multiple interpretations, broadly speaking it has three key dimensions. Firstly, economic, which relates to the free flow of goods, services, investments, labour and information across national borders in order to maximise capital accumulation (Olssen et al., 2004). It therefore has a key influence on the international world order and individual nation-states' economic positions. Secondly, 'cultural globalisation which involves the expansion of Western cultures (especially American and British) to all corners of the globe, promoting particular values that are supportive of consumerism and capital accumulation, and thirdly, political which involves international agreements and collaboration across powerful institutions and across national states, for example, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund' (Olssen et al., 2004: 5-7).

HEIs have clearly been greatly influenced by economic globalisation, as is evidenced by universities having to increase student numbers to meet the Government's student targets and to seek increased income generation and international market expansion strategies by recruiting overseas students (DfES, 2003a). This marketisation imperative is apparent at my own university, which is one of the largest recruiters of overseas students, with several satellite international offices facilitating expansion in this area (Universities UK, 2004). The growth of the overseas market can also be linked to cultural globalisation and the assumption that a British HE experience (particularly at one of the twenty leading research-intensive universities in the UK, referred to as 'Russell Group' universities) is seen as a highly desirable economic commodity conferring advantages in the

graduate recruitment market (Russell Group Association for Widening Participation, 2003). Such perceptions firmly locate HE as a positional good, especially since the abolition of the fee subsidy for overseas students in 1981. In Bourdieusian terms, this phenomenon could be equated with the transportation of cultural capitalism across nation states and the internationalisation of reproductive cultural privileges to minority elites.

The context of practice and the dilemmas of an Admissions Tutor

My concern in this article is that a market driven *expansion* of HE, including the recruitment of overseas students, often appears to be potentially at odds with the objective of *widening* participation, limiting the scope for recruiting UK based non-traditional students in subjects of high demand. Heagney (2003: 2) suggests this is already problematic in some areas by illustrating how the growth of the overseas market amongst Australian universities (this makes up eleven per cent of Australia's HE sector revenue) has had a negative effect on access outcomes and led to a decline in the proportion of home-based students from lower socio-economic groups between 1991 and 2002. In terms of the context of my own professional practice, widening participation policy has led to increased demand for places. Within my department there has been more than a threefold increase in applications for the undergraduate social work programme since 2002, when 278 undergraduate applications were received compared to 968 in 2005 (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005a). A key consequence of this phenomenon is that demand for places by far exceeds supply, which in turn creates intense competition for places, as the following statistic for the BA Social Work illustrates: the ratio of applications to entrants for the academic year 2004/5 was 1:44, i.e. 752 applicants applied for 18 places (Dillon, 2004b). Increased competition amplifies the potential for HEIs to admit the 'best' performing or the most academic students. If universities choose the 'best' students they may compromise widening participation policy objectives and are in danger of reinforcing claims that HE is elitist and unrepresentative of the broader population (Archer et al., 2003); in doing so, universities may

also reinforce the class divisions that the widening participation policy was purportedly set up to address. In Bourdieusian terms, HEIs may also unwittingly be magnifying the prevalence of elite habitus, which is counter to the social objectives of widening participation.

Reflecting on my own practice, it could be suggested that if I simply take the best academically qualified students or promote overseas recruitment in my capacity of Admissions Tutor, I risk reinforcing social divisions and inequalities by rejecting non-traditional students. However, I would argue that an HE experience should be open to all students with the ability to study at the required level. A key way in which I strive to promote equity is by offering places on the social work programmes to students from a variety of different backgrounds. I also compile an annual admissions report on the social characteristics of students offered places - taking into account gender, ethnicity, age, disability, etc. - which enables access outcomes to be monitored and is circulated to key stakeholders. The tensions within HE and widening participation policy lead me continually to question my role as Admissions Tutor. The professional and academic requirements for social work training require me to be highly selective when making selection decisions; only candidates achieving good scores in selection tests (mathematics and literacy) and individual interviews are offered places on the programme. In applying stringent selection criteria am I unwittingly reinforcing elite habitus, or am I merely upholding stringent professional and academic entry requirements for social work training? I would hope the latter and, that in doing so, I am also endeavouring to promote equity and social justice by supporting non-traditional students' access to the social work programmes. A key way in which I strive to do this - and to avoid perpetuating social disadvantage - is by working closely with local schools and colleges, for example, visiting students on access programmes to provide guidance on applying to university and preparing for interview. Whilst these activities are time consuming, they may be an important response to the dilemmas and unwanted consequences of current HE and widening participation policy. However, such activities do not fully eradicate the professional dilemmas I experience. It could be argued that in

promoting access to HE in a context of high demand for places, I am raising expectations in the knowledge that few of these students are likely to be offered them. Moreover, such strategies do not address disaffected students deterred from applying to university in the first place because of social disadvantages, for example, fear of debt (Lall et al., 2003; Universities UK, 2003; Callender and Jackson, 2005). In summary, the professional dilemmas arising suggest that while ‘mass higher education is an inherently democratic concept’, it may be that ‘in the current [competitive] context, it is the democracy of the marketplace’ (Harrison, 1994 cited by Morley, 1999: 32).

Reflecting more generally on the implications of the current policy drivers in UK HE in the context of my own professional practice, I would also argue that widening participation and other competing policies’ objectives have also had a significant organisational impact and have led to what Ball (2003) refers to as increased ‘performativity’ as academic and administrative staff struggle to respond to burgeoning workloads. Palfreyman (2002: 6) observed five years ago that the shift towards a mass system of HE in the UK had led to more than a doubling of students during the 1990s with a concomitant decline in ‘staff-student ratios’ from 1:10 to 1:20. Interviews with colleagues within my own university confirm issues of workload intensification. One of the interviewees indicated that the staff-student ratio is now 25:1 and that, in her opinion, the increased and hidden costs (staff time) of widening participation are increasingly being realised (Dillon, 2005b). The following excerpt from an admissions office colleague aptly illustrates this point:

I think that there is much more demanded of staff these days because admissions in particular are frontline. We all get emails everyday, some within the team more than others but we’ve all got roles and duties. Then of course we’ve got a huge post coming in. We just come in and do what we can in the time we are given. This often means that we end up at the end of the day working overtime, calling in temps.

In summary, the context of influence of widening participation and other HE related policies has been all-encompassing and has created wider tensions as

HEIs struggle to respond to several competing agendas whilst at the same time endorsing HE as a democratic good.

The context of outcomes

This section of the article focuses specifically on access outcomes. In a UK context, a study by Sargent et al. (1997) (cited by Morgan-Klein, 2000: 10) indicates that in the UK twice as many people from higher social classes (e.g. A and B) access HE than those from lower classes (e.g. D and E). Trow (2005: 4) indicates that inequality of access amongst different social classes is also a prevailing problem cross-nationally by illustrating that although:

...the proportions entering higher education in every country vary sharply in different regional groups, religions and ethnic groups, and socio-economic classes, everywhere the proportions from the upper and middle classes are significantly higher than from the working classes or farmers, despite a generation of efforts to close the gap.

On a micro level, statistics collected within my own department over a four year period provide some indication of the reasons for differential access outcomes amongst different social classes. Analysis of undergraduate social work applications consistently illustrates that a high percentage of applicants are rejected at the short-listing stage. On aggregate, 71 per cent of BA Social Work applications were rejected at the short-listing stage (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2005a). The most common reason why applications were unsuccessful was poor literacy skills. Further analysis of applications over a four year period also revealed that students attending particular Access to HE programmes were less likely to be short-listed or offered a place. Applications received from these colleges are frequently characterised by poor supporting personal statements, unsatisfactory levels of literacy and insubstantial references from access tutors. An interview with an admissions office colleague (Dillon, 2005b) revealed these problems as a broader issue for the university school in question:

I can’t give specific examples but I could tell you that ‘N’ and ‘B’ colleges are areas where we are known to have particular difficulties

from applicants that have applied from access programmes. I think some, not necessarily our partnership colleges don't properly prepare the students for HE and I think that they are set up to fail.

The colleges referred to here are known to be within socio-economically disadvantaged areas with a significant number of students having underachieved at school and undertaking Access to HE programmes. These kinds of issues relate to what Bourdieu referred to as institutional habitus. Reay et al. (2001) highlight how institutional habitus can influence educational choices and impact on access outcomes by illustrating how organisational cultures within schools and colleges (which are generally linked to wider socio-economic processes) can influence academic attainment, students' aspirations, teachers' expectations of students and HEI choices. The evidence presented here suggests that elite and institutional habitus remain pervasive forces, with the most powerful groups in societies continuing to be the main beneficiaries and the less powerful least likely to gain access to HE. In terms of the context of outcomes, inequality of access appears to remain strongly correlated with social class and is a prevailing problem both nationally and cross-nationally. This suggests widening participation policy and the actions that professionals such as myself take to mitigate social disadvantage may only be having a limited impact, which perhaps calls for 'new modes of collectivism that pay [more] attention to the legitimate aspirations of individuals from all social backgrounds' (Whitty, 2002: 79).

The context of political struggle: concluding considerations

This article has drawn together different arguments, analyses and evidence to demonstrate the sometimes contradictory and self-defeating objectives of government widening participation policy. The central contention arising from the evidence presented is that inequality of access for non-traditional students remains a persistent problem within HE, which indicates that the political and social strategies implemented through widening participation policy have only been marginally successful. The evidence presented also illustrates the tendency for New Labour's third-way discourse to stress policy objectives that are inherently contradictory and thus incompatible.

Jary and Jones (2004) pick up on this tendency by referring to the 'janus face' of the 2003 Education White Paper:

At the same time as endeavouring to create fair access and social justice within a much expanded system it also sets out to maintain a minority of institutions as 'world class' universities. How and whether these goals can be simultaneously achieved is a central issue and dilemma in current HE policy. (Jary and Jones, 2004: 1)

These intertextual contradictions and inconsistencies in policies are of concern especially vis-a-vis competing economic and social objectives. The economic imperatives explicitly identified in widening participation policy are commensurate with utilitarian principles (e.g. massification) but are, paradoxically, in direct conflict with the more implicit social objectives espousing social inclusion and social justice. How can this 'mixed bag of goods' be reconciled? Herein lies the nub of the matter - which perhaps also explains the general lack of clarity in policy in political terms: is HE per se a democratic good or a positional good as Bourdieu and structuralist paradigms suggest it has become? The evidence presented in this article suggests 'the jury is still out' on social democracy and also illustrates the failure of Labour's third-way to reconcile irreconcilable social and economic values. HE remains a firmly entrenched positional good, which supports Bourdieu's contention that HEIs are a conduit for elite cultural transformation, and which also suggests that widening participation policy will continue to play a marginal role in promoting democracy based on the egalitarian principles of social inclusion and social justice. Concluding on a more optimistic note, it is important not to under-estimate the role of individual self-determining agency in shaping educational opportunities, i.e. the actions that students take, and institutional habitus, i.e. the key contributions that we professionals can make, in supporting widening participation and HE as a democratic good.

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